



Save Alaska's Past: The Archeological Resources Protection Act



Salvage excavation underway at a looted site in the Noatak National Preserve. NPS Photo

Why Archeology?

It's exciting to see a little piece of the past on the ground -- to feel that you have some connection with those who came before. The belongings, living quarters, and material objects of these people survive today as archeological sites. An archeological site can be anything from an isolated artifact lying on the surface of the ground to a village site many acres in size. Its significance is determined by what is there, how well it is preserved, and how rare it is. Archeology represents our heritage and is fascinating to many people.

What About Alaska?

There are over 150,000 archeological sites in the State of Alaska. They range in age from 12,000 years old up to the recent past, and are located all over the state. Separately, they are pieces of a puzzle. Together, they tell the story of Alaska's past and the entrance of people into North America thousands

of years ago. The park units that make up Western Arctic National Parklands contain some of the oldest archeological remains found in Alaska. Descendants of these long-ago people still have a close relationship with the land. Every archeological site is unique and deserves our protection and respect.

The Archeological Site

The artifacts themselves tell us relatively little about a past culture. Of more importance is the artifact's **association** or **context**. This refers to its location or placement in relation to nearby evidence of human activities such as dwellings, burials, storage pits, fire hearths or work areas. If someone moves or takes an artifact from its original place, that context is damaged. It is also important to know something about the environmental conditions at the time a site was occupied. This type of information can be obtained

through the recovery of pollen, soil, food remains, shell and plant remains during an archeological excavation. However, if a site has been disturbed through erosion, vandalism or looting, much of this information is destroyed. The remaining pieces of the puzzle form an incomplete - and sometimes inaccurate - picture of prehistoric life. If a site is found that is in danger or being destroyed, it is best to bring this to the attention of a professional archeologist before it is too late.

Facts You Should Know

Many of the archeological sites in Alaska are on federal lands. These lands include National Parks, National Forests, National Wildlife Refuges, and Bureau of Land Management lands. Western Arctic National Parklands provides the same level of federal protection to every archeological site within its boundaries.

The Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 makes it **illegal** to excavate, remove, or damage protected archeological sites. It is also illegal to purchase, sell, receive, or transport artifacts or other materials from a protected archeological site. It is a **felony** if violations to the law result in damage to a site or trade in artifacts in excess of \$500.

Penalties For Offenses

For a felony offense, first time offenders can be fined up to \$20,000 and imprisoned for up to one year. Second time felony offenders can be fined up to \$100,000 and imprisoned for up to five years. The felony offense may also result in loss of a Masters' license, voting privileges and the right to own and possess a firearm.

Also, any vehicles such as fishing vessels, airplanes, or ORVs that were used during such activities may be seized.

The National Park Service is actively enforcing the regulations set forth in the Archeological Resources Protection Act.

How You Can Help

Rewards of up to \$500 may be awarded to any person who furnishes information that leads to the conviction of a criminal violation of the Archeological Resources Protection Act. This law is aggressively enforced by Alaska's land management agencies. You can help by reporting suspected archeological

site looting or artifact trafficking by calling 1-800-478-2724. For more information call Western Arctic National Parklands headquarters at 907-442-3890. Your assistance in helping protect these irreplaceable treasures of the past is greatly appreciated.